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LIE TESTS BACKED BY JUSTICE DEPT.

It Says They Would Be Correct
as a Condition for Access
to Classified Material

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 19 — A Justice Department official said today that it would be appropriate for Federal agencies to require polygraph, or lie-detector, examinations of "randomly selected employees" as a condition of access to certain kinds of sensitive classified information, even if there was no evidence of a breach in security.

The Congressional testimony by Richard K. Willard, Deputy Assistant Attorney General, indicated a significant extension of a March 11 order by President Reagan, which itself called for vast expansion of the use of polygraph examinations, but only "in the course of investigations of unauthorized disclosures of classified information."

At the same hearing, the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment released a comprehensive study casting new doubt on the long disputed ability of polygraph examinations to detect lies in such situations.

More than 10 other witnesses, including George W. Ball, a former Undersecretary of State, constitutional scholars and prominent journalists, denounced both the expanded polygraph use and the other main feature of the March 11 secrecy order, a system of censorship affecting more than 100,000 officials up to Cabinet rank for the rest of their lives.

'Should Be Very Careful'

"I think we should be very careful in our obsession with the Soviet Union that we don't imitate their methods and become much more like them," said Mr. Ball. He termed the new lifetime secrecy agreement, which the Administration plans to require more than 100,000 officials to sign, "an appalling document" that would "render impossible informed comments on evolving events" by former officials.

The secrecy agreements require officials who handle highly classified intelligence material to submit for prepublication review by Government censors, even after leaving office, anything they write involving intelligence activities, including books, articles, speeches and other materials. Even unclassified information could not be published until cleared, and the censors could delete anything they deemed classified.

The hearing reflected rising concern in Congress as the Administration moves to implement its sweeping new measures to stop unauthorized disclosures of classified information to the press and others. Mr. Reagan says he has the authority to order such measures without Congressional approval but not many officials have not yet signed the new secrecy agreement.

National Security Panel

The hearing was held by the Legislation and National Security subcommittee of the House Government Operations Committee. Representative Jack Brooks, Democrat of Texas, the chairman, said the prepublication review requirement "is classic censorship, or prior restraint." He denounced using polygraph tests in "a dragnet approach of dubious effectiveness and constitutionality."

The study by the Office of Technology Assessment concluded that "there is no scientific evidence to establish the validity of polygraph testing" to detect lies in the investigation of national security leaks or in screening personnel.

The study, based on a comprehensive review of available research, said that polygraph testing to detect national security leaks would probably "incorrectly identify significant members of innocent persons as deceptive," and that foreign intelligence agencies might be able to train their agents to beat the polygraph.

"Only in the area of criminal investigations has O.T.A. found meaningful evidence of polygraph validity," although there have been "significant error rates" even in that context. Dr. John H. Gibbons, the agency director, testified in summarizing the report.

Mr. Willard, the chief architect of the Reagan secrecy program, and Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, testified that they believe polygraphs were highly useful although not infallible in investigations of national security breaches, based on long experience in the intelligence agencies and on other evidence.

Also at today's hearing, the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, reported that more than 113,000 Federal employees in various agencies would be required under the Reagan program to sign secrecy agreements requiring them to submit their writings to prepublication review.

Number Facing the Tests

This extends to officials at the highest levels of the White House, State, Defense and Justice Departments and other parts of the Government a system of lifelong censorship, enforceable by court injunctions, that covered only the intelligence officials before the Reagan Administration took office.

The G.A.O. said under the Reagan order polygraph examinations could be required of over 2.5 million individuals, or almost half of the Federal work force, both civilian and military, and 1.5 million employees of Government contractors with security clearances, in investigations of unauthorized disclosures. Demotion or transfer could follow a refusal to submit to a polygraph examination in the course of an investigation of unauthorized disclosures, according to the March 11 order.

Mr. Willard said the new measures merely extended to those who handle intelligence information the same safeguards that have long been applied to those in the intelligence agencies who produce it.